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Chapter 13

Borders of Belonging: The UK Border Agency Museum as a Nation-Building Site

Claire Sutherland

Museums have a key role to play in both shaping and reflecting public discourse surrounding migration, an eminently contested, but ultimately under-represented, aspect of national memory and public policy. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, a series of emigration and immigration museums have opened across Western Europe, notably in Germany, Spain, Italy and France. The United Kingdom has also seen a range of privately and publicly funded initiatives across the museum sector, aimed at highlighting Britain's contemporary cultural diversity and the history of immigration to the UK. For example, former UK immigration minister Barbara Roche has launched an initiative to create a national museum of migration.¹ Elsewhere, the UK Border Agency Museum, located within Liverpool's National Maritime Museum, has begun integrating the theme of immigration into its permanent exhibition. As the only UK museum – except regimental museums – to be fully funded by and representative of a government ministry, this exhibit already offers valuable insights into how cross-border flows are presented for public consumption. At the same time, the UK Border Agency's very name highlights what its museum has in common with continental European migration museums: all help construct borders of national belonging. Accordingly, the present chapter sets out to analyse the UK Border Agency Museum as a nation-building site. The first section considers the connections between local and national loyalties. The second looks at the conceptual links between nation and citizen in the museums context, leading to an analysis of the UK Border Agency Museum in Section III. As an example of how a sense of British belonging can be constructed by focusing on its borders, the permanent exhibition speaks volumes about the challenges of representing migration in a relatively dispassionate and widely accessible way.

I

Nation-building is defined here as official, government-led nationalism aimed at legitimating the state (Sutherland 2012: 7). The flow of migrants across state

¹ <www.migrationmuseum.org>.

borders contributes to shaping nation-building and integration discourses, both in countries of settlement and countries at the origin of a diaspora (Sutherland 2012: 119). Museums also contribute to the dominant discourse of national self-understanding by preserving some aspects of national history and culture while 'forgetting' others (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The influential theorist of nationalism Benedict Anderson recognised the importance of museums to nation-building when he stated that 'museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political' (1991: 178). Building on previous analyses of national museums (Sutherland 2005, 2010), this chapter focuses on a museum which forms part of Liverpool's National Maritime Museum complex. It is one element of a larger, ongoing research project into museums that are located at the physical margins of their respective European states, namely Barcelona, Genoa, Bremerhaven, Hamburg, Marseille and Antwerp as well as Liverpool. The research is designed to explore the relevance to nation-building of port cities 'on the sidelines' of states and the migrants who pass(ed) through those ports. Putting these nation-building sites centre stage highlights the importance of migration to delimiting the borders of national belonging. One way of tracing this is through the way museums construct migrant identities, thereby translating the analytical focus on national borders into an empirical focus on how cross-border flows are represented in museums. The aim is to understand how museum constructions of migrants at the margins build the nation itself through the framing of sameness and difference, nation and Other.

John Kelly has criticised Benedict Anderson's widely cited definition of nations as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991) or, as Kelly puts it, 'symmetrical units of imagined, communal self-love' (Kelly 1998: 844), because it suggests a horizontal levelling of individuals through notions of national solidarity and comradeship. This is belied by the hierarchies that often pervade nation-building in practice (Sutherland 2012: 47). Similarly, Partha Chatterjee points out that people today draw on many heterogeneous ways of constructing and experiencing the nation, cautioning against Anderson's rather utopian depiction of the nation as promoting horizontal bonds of solidarity, when nation-building often goes hand in hand with enduring inequality (2005). In a book tellingly entitled *Dependent Communities*, Caroline Hughes suggests that 'the task of elites is to create not only a narrative that can elicit allegiance, but a web of practical connections that links the state to society, in a manner that can give form to claims of central representation' (2009: 197). Museums, through the stories they tell in their exhibitions, help create these narratives.

It has been argued 'that the transnational flow of ideas, goods, images and persons – intensified by recent developments in the globalization of capital – ... tends to drive a deeper wedge between national space and its urban centers' (Holston and Appadurai 1999: 3). This applies not only to capital cities and global cultural and commercial centres like New York, Los Angeles and Shanghai but also to so-called 'secondary' cities, which often chafe at being overshadowed by their more prominent peers and seek to carve out their own identity. Not for

nothing do places like Bilbao, Stuttgart and Shenzhen employ world-renowned 'starchitects' to heighten their profile (Glancey 2012; Sklair 2006; Souto 2011). Museums in particular have the potential to reach iconic status and quickly forge a close link with the identity of a city. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Gallery in Bilbao, I.M. Pei's glass pyramid at the Louvre Museum in Paris and Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin are cases in point, even though the latter two have had to make their mark in already crowded cultural centres. Though less well-known, the museum quarters on Liverpool's riverside and the port of Bremerhaven in Germany are also designed as focal points for culture and tourism, while the Ballinstadt Museum is an explicit attempt to help regenerate a disadvantaged area of Hamburg. How are the peripheral location of museums and the stories they present linked to the ongoing process of nation-building?

In 2011, declassified UK government papers revealed that in 1981, following the Toxteth riots in Liverpool, then Chancellor of the Exchequer Geoffrey Howe wrote a short letter to his Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher suggesting that the city might be allowed to go into 'managed decline' (BBC 2011a). His remarks quickly became notorious as indicative of uneven, hierarchical relations of power between central government in London and the English regions (Dorling 2012). Howe's letter questioned the wisdom of investing in Liverpool and 'having nothing left for possibly more promising areas such as the West Midlands or, even [*sic*], the North East'. Using highly evocative imagery of a barren place, with little potential to grow and flourish, he went on: 'It would be even more regrettable if some of the brighter ideas for renewing economic activity were to be sown only on relatively stony ground on the banks of the Mersey' (BBC 2011a). In 2011, Lord David Alton, a local Liberal MP at the time of the Toxteth riots, responded that 'this idea of managed decline, that you can simply let one of the country's great cities slip into the River Mersey and opt for decay rather than renewal, shows an ambivalence to the north of England which still affects politics to this day'. Employing yet another striking image, he said that Howe's suggestion to let Liverpool decline 'was like creating a museum of horrifying example' as a warning to others (BBC 2011a). This episode highlights a sense of division and detachment between London and Liverpool, with Liverpool cast as peripheral.

The comment and debate ignited by Howe's words, even 30 years on, underscored the enduring tension between regional or local affiliations and nation-building, as represented by central government. At such times, 'the nation appears remote, self-serving and characterised by exclusion and patronage' (Hughes 2009: 206). This tension is evident not only in UK politics, but also in public opinion and popular culture. For example, as a public service broadcaster the BBC has decided to move operations to Salford and Glasgow so as to appear less London-centric. The tension also extends to the BBC's programming (BBC 2011b) and has been documented in UK public opinion surveys (Wyn Jones et al. 2012), think tank reports (Wind-Cowie and Gregory 2011), and newspaper columns (Moore 2012). At the same time, the government seeks to promote a close sense of continuity between local and national belonging. For example, Marinetto points to recent UK

governments' increasing emphasis on 'active citizenship', which is predominantly linked to participation in the local community (2003: 103). Marinetto links the trend to an ideological concern among left-leaning politicians to promote a sense of community on the one hand and the need to balance rights and duties at the other, more right-wing, end of the political spectrum (2003: 117).

On coming to power in 2010, UK Prime Minister David Cameron's attempt to promote voluntary work and community groups through the 'Big Society' initiative sought to connect local activism to a sense of nationwide solidarity. Specifically, the 2010 government coalition agreement aimed 'to create a climate that empowers local people and communities [in] building a Big Society', implicitly understood to mean the national, UK level or at least England (Prime Minister's Office 2010a). In his speech at the initiative's official launch in May 2010, David Cameron also spoke about encouraging 'people to play a more active role in their communities' and explicitly linked this to a proposed National Citizen Service for 16- to 18-year-olds (Prime Minister's Office 2010b). This shows how attempts to link local loyalties with nationwide initiatives still persist in politics, despite well-documented feelings of alienation at the periphery (Wyn Jones et al. 2012). These are summed up by an engraved quote in the Museum of Liverpool, which opened in mid-2011, expressing the sentiment that the great thing about Liverpool is that it is not England! If one accepts that competing identities are principally expressions of power relations, rather than any 'genuine' or 'traditional' characteristics, it becomes possible to relate such debates to constructed dichotomies of centre and periphery (Winter 2009: 136). Indeed, the construction of the nation is as much about the power to dominate as the ability to make nationality meaningful. The following section places the powerplay of centre-periphery relations within the narrower context of museums and their potential impact on citizenship.

II

The Economist newspaper has argued that states should use people's place of residence rather than their citizenship as a basis for allocating rights and responsibilities, 'because it stems from a conscious decision to live in a country and abide by its rules' (*The Economist* 2012). It reasons: 'live and pay your taxes in a country – and you should then be treated in the same way as any other resident, and better than a citizen who has lived overseas and not paid up'. This view chimes with some recent academic scholarship on citizenship (Kostakopoulou 2008). What it omits, however, is any explicit reference to a sense of national belonging or its ongoing role in legitimating the nation-state itself. Although *The Economist* acknowledged that 'citizenship is the glue keeping individual and state together', it did not address the key role nation-building plays in this relationship. Benedict Anderson long ago diagnosed what he called 'a crisis of the hyphen' between the concepts of nation and state (in McCrone 1998: 173). If the nation is indeed an 'imagined community' writ large, albeit a hierarchical one, then it is important

to understand how 'peripheral' or 'provincial' representations of the nation contribute to a wider sense of belonging. Museums offer an important forum for individuals to explore the link between abstract notions of citizenship, national belonging and their everyday impact on individuals. For example, the analysis of the UK Border Agency Museum in Section III suggests that there is a clear strand of negative Othering running through its exhibition, which applies not only to criminal smugglers but also to immigrant flows and foreign visitors as targets of suspicion. This highlights the potential for museums to shape visitor perceptions of who belongs to the nation and who should be excluded.

As Gerard Delanty put it, 'the power to name, create meaning, construct personal biographies and narratives by gaining control over the flow of information, goods and cultural processes is an important dimension of citizenship as an active process ... which mostly takes place in the informal context of everyday life' (2009: 128). Delanty's emphasis on citizenship as a learned process remains rather vague and difficult to grasp, much as the notion of national belonging itself. However, museums like that of the UK Border Agency address some of the practical consequences of belonging within nation-state borders, such as the impact of taxation and control. Newman, McLean and Urquhart offer a way of thinking about museums and social inclusion, understood in terms of active citizenship. Their findings suggest that: 'enabling the process of identity construction to be re-established and so giving people the capacity to become active citizens is possibly the most significant contribution museums can make to resolving social problems' (Newman, McLean and Urquhart 2005: 54). Specifically, involvement in local history projects was found to increase people's self-esteem, their sense of belonging to their current homes (in this case disadvantaged satellites of Glasgow and Newcastle) and even civic pride. By promoting self-confidence through museum initiatives, the local area was found to be 'an important context within which this sense of self was constructed' (Newman, McLean and Urquhart 2005: 53), once again emphasising the importance of local loyalties to a sense of community belonging. In fostering active citizenship and participation in the public sphere, museums latch on to individuals' identification with their local neighbourhood or community, which may or may not feed into a larger sense of national belonging (Wyn Jones et al. 2012).

Museums' contribution to constructing communities has been a key principle guiding their evolution from 'cabinets of curiosities' in nineteenth-century Europe, though until recently this largely remained an elite-driven, top-down process (Green 2001; Message 2006). As Gordon and Stack suggest in a different historical context, however, 'citizens of towns, by contrast [to national citizens], could aspire to being part of a public arena in which their views might just count for something' (2007: 118). This establishes a link between museums as identity-building arenas and a form of citizenship that 'suggests ways for people to take citizenship back from States, while still leaving a place for government' (Gordon and Stack 2007: 117–18). Tellingly, 'the cultural constitution of citizenship' (Janet Roitman in Gordon and Stack 2007: 119) through processions and parades, both

mediaeval and modern, has been identified as ‘a key vehicle through which the city dweller could articulate and enact a sense of belonging within multiple, overlapping identities’ (Gordon and Stack 2007: 119). It is submitted that museums can play a comparable role in negotiating urban and national citizenship today. As Aihwa Ong points out, ‘in an information age driven by innovation and migration, ambitious cities are becoming spaces of mutating citizenship’ (2007: 88). The iconic new museums often found in such cities are a privileged forum for representing and debating that mutating citizenship. The following section interprets the approach of the UK Border Agency Museum, located within the National Maritime Museum in Liverpool.

III

In 2012, the UK Border Agency Museum began an ongoing process of integrating the theme of migration into its exhibition. However, its permanent display already emphasised the protection of borders against a range of outside threats in ways that could influence coverage of migration. Since its inception in 1994, the museum has had to keep pace with several transformations in its funding ministry, including the merger of Her Majesty’s Customs and Excise with Inland Revenue in 2005. For example, the permanent exhibition, called ‘Seized! The Border and Customs Uncovered’, opened in May 2008 but was renamed to reflect the formation of the UK Border Agency in 2009. As a result, the museum’s remit has also been widened to include the theme of migration, and curators have embarked on a sustained period of research and reflection into how this might complement existing displays on a relatively small budget. The following analysis considers how existing displays already enable a rather negative interpretation of immigration by constructing a series of dichotomies between guilty and innocent, insider and outsider, suspicion and protection, us and them, thereby allowing visitors to draw parallels and make inferences between one dichotomy and another.

The exhibition aims to strike a balance between conveying the need to control smuggling and contraband and injecting a little excitement into the world of customs procedures. The exhibition title, ‘Seized!’ clearly nods towards the latter aspect, which sometimes sits uneasily with more sober interpretations. For example, the panel at the exhibition entrance states:

UK Border Agency works on our behalf to protect us by controlling the movement of people and illegal goods, such as guns and drugs. Revenue and Customs officers also work to raise taxes to pay for services we all use. It is an unseen world of smuggling, intrigue and detection.

The last sentence is rather at odds with the first two, both thematically and grammatically, because it is not clear to what ‘It is an unseen world’ refers. The sentence seeks to create a sense of excitement to draw in the visitor. in marked

contrast to preceding references to the more mundane world of community service. The use of the first person plural includes the visitor in a shared community, namely the United Kingdom. Creating a sense of 'we-ness' is a key nationalist trope (Billig 1995). As such, this introductory panel already appeals to a sense of national belonging that implicitly justifies the policing of nation-state borders throughout the exhibition. It also echoes the museum's aim to 'communicate the role of the UK Border Agency in ensuring our way of life is fair, safe, civilised and protected' (UK Border Agency Museum 2012b). This sets up a dichotomy that is central to theories of nationalism, between 'our way of life' and an unnamed Other potentially threatening a 'fair, safe, civilised' society that has to be 'protected'. Casting the UK Border Agency in the role of protector also underlines the national arena implicit in the statement.

The UK Border Agency's name has evidently been chosen to emphasise the protection of UK borders and, by extension, the national community evoked by the phrase 'our way of life'. Parallel to this, the museum website identifies its key themes as 'anti-smuggling' and 'the importance of raising taxes' in order to 'explore issues of fairness and safety in society, affecting all of us today' (UK Border Agency Museum 2012a). Again, the references to smuggling and taxes, which are only meaningful in the context of the bordered nation-state, suggest that 'all of us today' is used here as a national rather than a local or global referent, and that the term 'society' connotes the UK and its citizens. Thus, the introductory texts in the museum and on its website clearly, though not explicitly, delimit the UK territorial space and paint it as a fair and civilised place in need of security and protection.

Far from being marginal, borders are central to the remit of the UK Border Agency and its museum. In turn, the protection of borders is constitutive of the nation-state as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) and a mapped territory, because borders help give meaning and identity to all that is contained within. Therefore, the UK Border Agency museum is just as much about nation-building as it is about border controls, and this is explicit in its exhibition. For example, a panel about tax is titled 'The Nation's Money' and another panel entitled 'Our Island Nation' points out how Britain's coastline has been both a defensive asset and an added difficulty in controlling smuggling. Words like 'hidden', 'guarding', 'waiting', 'protecting', 'frontier', 'watching', 'suspicious' and 'concealed', printed in capitalised, bold type against a yellow background, run like ticker tape along the bottom of a large-scale frieze of a calm seascape and other surrounding panels, as if to underline the protective function of borders and heighten mistrust of the Other attempting to cross them. Apparently, the empty, untroubled seascape should not be taken at face value, just like smugglers who, to quote from panel texts, use the 'art of distraction' to look 'completely innocent'. The exhibition presents so-called 'profiling' as the customs officer's weapon against this. One panel specifies that officers 'look at where travellers have come from, who they are with and how they have paid for their tickets'. Although this seems to acknowledge that profiling constitutes little more than a random selection on the basis of an

individual's suspicious looks, provenance or company, it is defended elsewhere in the exhibition as pseudo-scientific. Indeed, the panel titled 'Observation Test' reads: 'It's not just about looking. It's about using research to predict what may happen or to spot something that is not quite as it should be.' This recalls the museum website's evocation of a 'safe, fair, civilised' society. A berthed ship or travellers streaming past an airport desk appear to represent a potential threat to this society, which is why borders are so crucial to the national narrative.

The exhibition most clearly defines the Other as criminal gang leaders, represented in one panel by a picture of a huge yacht subtitled 'Luxury'. It is easy to condemn this Other, but a game asking visitors to examine airport arrivals at customs perhaps unwittingly points to the dangers of categorising individuals as legal or illegal, with all the connotations of belonging this entails. Entitled 'Spot the Smuggler', the game asks visitors, under time pressure, to judge whether individuals photographed going through airport customs look like smugglers or not. Each time the game is played the figures are randomly labelled either 'innocent' or 'guilty', thereby highlighting how difficult it is to judge by appearances. However, this conclusion only emerges if the game is played at least twice, which visitors are unlikely to do. In effect, then, visitors are asked to judge by appearances and have no basis for justifying their chosen answer, which will be randomly 'right' or 'wrong' depending on which iteration they play. This raises questions as to the basis for customs officials' decisions. It is not clear on what these are founded or whether prejudice may have a part to play in them. All of the individuals pictured are white, presumably so as not to encourage racial stereotyping. The inclusion of black or Asian figures would have raised uncomfortable issues surrounding racial prejudice and whether it could play a part in judging likely guilt or innocence. One figure is female and another is in a wheelchair, but these nods to gender and disability do nothing to address the likely ethnic mix of people milling through UK airports. As it is, the 'Spot the Smuggler' game and the panels on profiling effectively highlight the random nature of border controls in practice. This undermines the image of competent customs officials dedicated to protecting UK security that is built up elsewhere in the exhibition by means of panels subtitled 'Chase, Arrest, Deterrent', 'Reliable, Searching' and 'Scrutiny', which describe different ways of detecting illegal activity, and one on the recent history of the customs service, subtitled 'Responsibility, On-line, Modern'.

In sum, the 'Seized!' exhibition asks visitors 'to enter a world in which things are not always as they seem' but does not interrogate the way in which dichotomies of 'us' and 'them', guilty and innocent are constructed. Instead, the first person plural is used to draw the visitor into an 'imagined community' of law-abiding, tax-paying citizens belonging to 'our island nation', which is guarded by well-trained officials ranked against the criminal Other. Customs staff are depicted as inherently watchful and suspicious of those seeking to cross into the 'fair, safe, civilised' UK, and this guardedness is connoted as positive throughout the exhibition. Visitors are encouraged to judge pictures of people entering the UK as innocent or guilty on sight, with only the questions 'What are they wearing?'

and 'What are they carrying?' to guide them. The overall message conveyed in the exhibition is that of an island fortress with a long history of vigilance against infiltration. This is best summed up in the panel portentously entitled 'Our Island Nation'. Part of it reads:

Being an island has helped us repel invaders in the past, but having such a long coastline makes us especially vulnerable to smuggling. Uniformed officers at ports and airports control both people and goods entering the country. However, they are not alone. The staff behind the scenes, who monitor and investigate trading activity, play an equally vital role in protecting our borders.

The panel features an image of waves beating against a strong seawall ending in a lighthouse, as if to highlight the potentially destructive forces attacking fortress Britain, itself a beacon of fair, civilised and safe values.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the UK Border Agency Museum can be read as dangerously self-aggrandising in its defence of 'British values'. The exhibition is ambivalent, not about the importance of preserving a sense of bounded, Westphalian sovereignty against all odds, but rather about how customs officials profile the Other and judge who is guilty or innocent in 'our' name. In the age of globalisation, European integration, multiculturalism and mass migration, this exhibition does not provide a promising role model for museums as 'spaces of mutating citizenship' (Ong 2007: 88). An examination of what she calls 'the cartography of citizenship', leads Dora Kostakopoulou to argue that 'the conventional idea of citizenship as membership in an undifferentiated statal community [is] unsuited' to the contemporary world (2008: 12), characterised by globalisation, constant cross-border flows and supranational integration. Yet nation-building persists today as the primary means of legitimating states, and governments still seek to mobilise local loyalties for this purpose. In turn, border controls are one reflection of the UK immigration minister Damian Green's wish to ensure that the 'right people are coming here. People who will benefit Britain, not just those who benefit by Britain' (in Travis 2012).

Major European centres like London, Amsterdam, Paris, Frankfurt and Milan have become the focus of state efforts to attract economic investment

their museums depict migration is thus particularly revealing of how the nation is defined and delimited today. Liverpool Maritime Museum's emigration gallery and the UK Border Agency's exhibition find themselves side by side by accident, and there has been no attempt to connect the two thematically. However, closer attention to Liverpool's history of emigration, as well as Bremerhaven and Hamburg migration museums' attempt to link Europe's history of emigration to greater tolerance for immigration today, might help the UK Border Agency Museum to navigate the treacherous waters of migration representation and interpretation.

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